

A Study on the Role of Panchayat Raj and Rural Development in Enabling Equitable Citizen Representation

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **Citizens have equal opportunities** to participate at **governance** in a representative democracy is primarily seen in **Panchayati Raj** (the rule of local councils). It was in 1993 that institutions of self-government, known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), were first institutionalised in India. The thought process behind the Panchayati Raj system was to make democracy functional at the local level, and driven by citizens' needs and participation. It was therefore introduced as a three-tier system that decentralised governance, decision making, and local development.

While panchayati raj institutions for the rural areas, created after great and prolonged struggle, have given rural dwellers their self-governance structures and a fair degree of empowerment, nothing similar has been done for urban dwellers. Participatory involvement of citizens in and accountability of local self-governance structures are almost totally absent in urban areas. The author discusses the work of a non-governmental organisation in which he is actively involved in attempting to create informal structures that seek to redress this shortcoming and offers a charter for more formally recognised structures that could be organised on a wider scale to give the urban dweller a voice. Participatory and accountability mechanism for the citizen. However, this does not mean that informal community structures like local residents' associations, neighbourhood groups and ward level federations will become less important. If anything, these structures can now become more effective beyond their social role, by linking their public issues at the grassroots into the appropriate platform, either the area sabha or the ward committee. The lessons from rural decentralisation indicate that while informal structures are important, parallel power structures should not be created. India stands at the inflection point of two critical trends: the increasing importance of local governments, and a critical mass of urbanisation. Both these have significant implications for governance outcomes on a range of important quality-of-life issues for citizens. Citizen participation is not just a moral argument, it is a strong accountability mechanism for local governments. While rural participation is imbedded in the Constitution, citizen involvement in urban areas is still very indirect. This needs to be urgently corrected. This paper describes the context of urban decentralisation and the need for citizen participation, and also offers a solution that can be imbedded into law at the state and municipality levels, without having to change the Constitution.

Key words: politics, India, Panchayat Raj, Empowerment, Political Participation, Reservation,

Introduction

The representation ratio between citizens and their elected representatives is almost 10 times larger for urban areas. In Bangalore, the ratio is 42,000 citizens for one elected representative. One possible interpretation of this could be that government is more than 100 times further away for the resident of Bangalore than for the average rural dweller.

In addition to this, the idea that every registered voter is a member of a grama sabha, and should participate in decision making through this vehicle, is one that at least has formal sanction in rural decentralisation, if not much track record.

In contrast, urban areas have the concept of the ward committees, which are meant to be constituted for the city corporations. In Bangalore for example, there are meant to be 28 (recently revised to 31) such ward committees, which are fatally hampered by the combination of a debatable nomination process, limited citizen representation and an ambiguous mandate.

So, while it may seem reasonable to believe that decentralisation is now only an implementation challenge in India, the reality is that we have an extremely skewed federalist structure at the third tier. And this situation is getting worse, because while India was 28 per cent urban at the turn of the century, it is projected to be 46 per cent urban by 2030.³

This failure to have a coherent rural-urban approach to decentralisation is a big lacuna in Indian federalism. Indeed it is astonishing that – despite the general rigour that has characterised India's approach to democratic institutionalisation, often correctly placing due process at a premium over short term outcomes – there has been such an intellectual vacuum with respect to urbanisation, with very few champions of the cause.

This lopsided approach can be traced even to the drafting of the two seminal pieces of legislation that have given rural and urban local governments their current positions – the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments respectively – and perhaps explains the difference in attitude that people in government have towards these two forms of local government even today. The 73rd amendment was the culmination of over four decades of struggle and intense debate by a range of players: three generations of Gandhians, advocates of rural self government, and champions of three tier federalism. This saw numerous initiatives for promoting panchayati raj institutions as well as two national committees separated by two decades – the Balwantrai Mehta committee in 1957, and the Asoka Mehta committee in 1977. Associated with this energy – possibly because of it – there is also a great deal of documentary evidence on the evolution of rural decentralisation in India. Unfortunately, this richness of material is absent when it comes to urban decentralisation. There were some noises about urban challenges through the early decades of our independence with the constitution of an All India Council of Mayors which consistently demanded greater urban autonomy. The mid-1980s saw the crystallising of some of this energy: for example, one of the recommendations of the National Commission on Urbanisation (NCU)

was to suggest that Article 40 of the directive principles of state policy – requiring states to organise panchayats as units of local self government in rural areas – be expanded to include urban areas as well.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Institutions** which enables equitable, efficient and easy distribution of assigned revenue through equitable citizen representation

Rural Development by PRIs :equitable citizen representation.

While the panchayat is an old concept in India—through its presence as caste-based panchayats in villages—the structure, processes, and functions of the PRI system today are totally different.

Mahatma Gandhi was among the first and most important leaders to advocate for Panchayati Raj. His vision of a village panchayat was a small self-sufficient republic with individual freedom, opportunities for all, and full participation of the people. While the idea seemed revolutionary at the time, it was Gandhi’s endorsement of it that perhaps explains why the PRI system was partially accepted by the makers of our constitution. PRIs were mentioned in Article 40 only as a Directive Principle of State Policy in 1950. It stated that steps shall be taken to organise village panchayats, and endow them with the powers and authority necessary for them to act as units of self-government.

However, around the same time, the central government took a different route to facilitate local development, launching the Community Development Programme (CDP) as a pilot in 1952. The CDP tried to push an expert-driven, top-down development processes, moving away from the idea of organising village communities and self-government.

The CDP, however, was not very successful, despite strong government backing. The reason for this was that under CDP, people were neither involved nor did they participate in their own development. In fact, this was why the [Balwant Rai Mehta Committee](#) was formed five years later, in January 1957, to review both the CDP and the [National Extension Service](#), and suggest measures for improvement.

The committee’s report [recommended](#) that, “the government should divest itself completely of certain duties and responsibilities and devolve them to a body which will have the entire charge of all development work within its jurisdiction, reserving to itself only the functions of guidance, supervision and higher planning”.

A three tier elected self-government known as the Panchayati Raj Institution was suggested—with specific duties and responsibilities outlined—thereby formalising what was earlier just a statement of intent in Article 40.

Following the Government of India's acceptance of these recommendations, various states started adopting the PRI system, with Rajasthan leading the pack in 1959, followed by Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and other states shortly after. Between 1959 and 1988 various committees were formed to study the PRI system and suggest recommendations, which ultimately culminated in Panchayati Raj Institutions being officially recognised through the passing of 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act.

How do PRIs function?

The amendment made it obligatory for the states to establish PRIs in accordance with the act, and the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad were introduced as elected local bodies. The Sarpanch, also known as *panch* or *pradhan* in different states became the elected head of the Panchayat through a formal electoral process. The Gram Sabha is recognised as the people's parliament at the village level—the lowest level of administration and comprises all adult members of the village. It has the power to plan, approve, and monitor various development programmes for its village. It has a constitutional mandate, and the elected PRIs are accountable to the Gram Sabha.

There have been further iterations since, such as the [Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas \(PESA\)](#) Act of 1996, which gave greater autonomy to people residing in tribal and forest areas. **Why are PRIs important, and what have they achieved till date?**

There were two basic ideas behind introducing such a system. First, it would decentralise the democratic set up by widening political representation of different social groups, especially women. Second, it would enable the building of efficient local institutions that could plan, execute, and monitor their communities' development through a participatory approach.

Today, 25 years on, these initial ideas must be seen as success indicators of the PRI system in India.

1. Decentralising the democratic process

In India, election to these local bodies has been carried out on a regular basis, in most cases, freely and fairly. Though some states have seen allegations of violence, these are primarily law and order issues.

Further, the formation of [2,49,016 Gram Panchayats](#), [6,603 Intermediate Panchayats](#) and [606 Zilla Panchayats](#) indicates the reach of decentralised governance in India. Out of 32 states, 19 have taken measures and reserved [50% of seats for women](#) in these local bodies.

As per the available data, in 2014, there were [29,50,128](#) elected Panchayati Raj representatives (the recent figures would be around three million), of which 19% were from Scheduled Caste, 12% from Scheduled Tribe communities, and 46% were women. The PRI system has therefore definitely deepened political representation in the country. This inclusion and representation of women, scheduled tribes and castes is critical given that

the socio-cultural systems in India are mostly caste and gender biased. Equal representation is essential if we have to focus on particular developmental issues and bring in equity.

2. The devolution of power

The second idea is critical, as it not only speaks to the role played by PRIs, but also reflects the willingness of both the central and state governments to give real power to these institutions. Without this devolution of power, decentralised self-government has no meaning.

The 73rd Amendment provisioned for 29 subject matters in the [11th schedule](#), over which PRIs would have complete power to plan, execute, and monitor. However, the current status of these differs across states. The funds, function and functionaries that form the three main components of the devolution of power vary, and thereby weaken the system in many respects. A [devolution report](#) published by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2015-16, mentioned that devolution has two main aspects: the operational core that includes funds, function, functionaries, and the support system that includes capacity building of PRIs, operationalising constitutional mechanisms and introducing systems of transparency and accountability.

From the reflections of the report, it can be concluded that the real devolution still has a long way to go. In terms of devolving function, functionary and finance, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Karnataka top the list, whereas Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Jharkhand are at the bottom.

What are the gaps?

Despite the well-thought through provisions, there are several problems in how PRIs function in practice.

1. State leadership and officials are unwilling to provide real power to local elected leaders.
2. Institutional structures like the district planning boards, created to expedite decentralised planning, are either non-functional or do not give priority to PRIs.
3. Limited efforts have been made to empower elected PRI representatives with their constitutional functions; the focus has mostly been on trainings on the schemes and programmes.
4. The state and central government have also started creating separate structures or units for implementing specific projects on education, health, and so on; this limits the role and powers of the PRIs.

As a result, in many cases, PRI representatives have become mere implementers and followers where as the idea was to build them as local leaders leading local development. Institutionalising Citizen Participation – A Proposal

From a constitutional standpoint, there has always been a bias towards the rural voter, whether it be the directive principles of state policy or the 73rd constitutional amendment.¹⁷ While the voter was a central figure in the 73rd amendment, in the 74th amendment on urban decentralisation, there is no mention of the phrase “a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls”. Even in Article 243S, which discusses the ward committee(s), the amendment is still engaged with institutional arrangements rather than recognising the centrality of the registered voter, as in the case of rural decentralisation.¹⁸

These constitutional amendments have percolated down to state laws for rural and urban decentralisation that mirror these biases. Two reports were prepared to assess urban decentralisation – the report of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (NCRCW), and the Sen committee report to review decentralisation in Kerala. However, these reports, while making incisive observations about the poor functioning of urban decentralisation and the need for greater citizen involvement, did not go far enough to fill the fundamental gap in the architecture of decentralisation to give a clear and formal status to every urban voter.

Any response to such a demand for citizen participation needs to address the following issues:

- (1) The creation of a mechanism for every registered voter to participate in issues of local government in a meaningful manner. This means creating an appropriate tier below the ward level.
- (2) An unambiguous role for these ward and subward platforms, so that there is a seamless integration between their role and that of the municipality. This role should be comprehensive, extending from planning to budgeting to oversight and financial authority, and possibly also to spatial planning issues like zoning, change in land use and comprehensive development plans that can be built bottom up.
- (3) The integration of the internal systems of the municipality to support such a decentralised architecture: appropriate accounting and budgetary systems; administrative support; establishment of necessary bank accounts; ward maps and GIS systems; data collection mechanisms at the ward level on issues like building starts and other such economic activities; voter rolls and BPL lists, and so on.
- (4) A calendar of activities that define clearly how these grassroots decision-making systems are linked to the processes at the municipality. For example, the municipality budget is to be placed before the taxation and finance committee at a certain time of the year, normally around January. It is then placed before the council within a few weeks for approval. Any proposed system of decentralisation can only be provided full teeth if it has a say in the budgeting process. This means that a calendar of its budgeting process needs to be created, to synchronise with the overall municipality calendar.

In fulfilling the above requirements, the first is the most critical: the establishment of the appropriate legitimate political and accountability “spaces”. Once these are done, then these spaces can be mandated with functions, roles and responsibilities, with appropriate support systems to fulfil these responsibilities.

This document concerns itself only with the first issue: the structure of decentralisation that links urban governance to the last citizen. The other issues of functions, duties and responsibilities are addressed in a separate document

The figure illustrates the solution being suggested and describes the proposed structure in detail. It can be understood in terms of platforms and participants. Platforms: There are three, at the level of the municipality (A), at the level of the ward (B), and at the level of the polling station, called the area sabha (C). There shall be a ward committee in every ward, irrespective of the size of the ward or the municipality. While the first two are well known, it is the area sabha that is being newly introduced. The footprint of every polling station could be the smallest unit in such an architecture; this could be called an area sabha. Each of these is a legitimate, formal space, which will be defined in terms of constitution, composition, functions, duties and responsibilities. Participants: Every registered voter of a polling booth (boundaries of the polling booth will be defined by the election commission) shall be a member of that area sabha. This creates an urban equivalent of the grama sabha, retains a reasonable level of intimacy, and recognises the unique features of urban dwellings.

At the next level of the ward committee, the current practice of nomination to the ward committee can be replaced by a nomination of an area sabha representative from the area sabha. The benefit of this structure is that it automatically adjusts for the size of a municipality or ward, rather than have a prescribed single size being defined for a ward committee. Large municipalities would have wards with greater population, more polling booths, and hence more area sabhas, resulting in larger ward committees. Smaller municipalities would have smaller population in each ward, hence fewer area sabhas and fewer members in each ward committee.

Conclusion

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) is a system of rural local self-government in India. Local Self Government is the management of local affairs by such local bodies who have been elected by the local people. PRI was constitutionalized through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 to build democracy at the grass roots level and was entrusted with the task of rural development in the country. In its present form and structure PRI has completed 26 years of existence. However, a lot remains to be done in order to further decentralization and strengthen democracy at the grass root level. Panchayats to prepare plans for economic development and

social justice in respect of subjects as devolved by law to the various levels of Panchayats including the subjects as illustrated in Eleventh Schedule (Article 243G). 74th Amendment provides for a District Planning Committee to consolidate the plans prepared by Panchayats and Municipalities (Article 243ZD). Budgetary allocation from State Governments, share of revenue of certain taxes, collection and retention of the revenue it raises, Central Government programmes and grants, Union Finance Commission grants (Article 243H). Establish a Finance Commission in each State to determine the principles on the basis of which adequate financial resources would be ensured for panchayats and municipalities (Article 243I). The Eleventh Scheduled of the Constitution places as many as 29 functions within the purview of the Panchayati Raj bodies. The time has come to move from political representation to power devolution. There is a need for the state political leadership to accept the importance of PRIs, and devolve power to them as mandated in the Constitution of India. Building the capacities of the PRIs not as mere implementers of the projects but as planners and evaluators would help strengthen the institution.

There is also a need for elected local leaders to come together with their constituents, and demand more control and autonomy as enshrined to them by the Constitution of India.

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